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AUTHOR Romeo, Lynn; Young, Susan A.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether a field placement in a preschool program enhanced preservice teachers' understanding of the emerging literacy process. The study was conducted in two preschool classrooms in an urban school district in central New Jersey during the spring semester of 1996. Subjects were 26 graduate and undergraduate preservice teachers who were involved in teaching or assisting in the teaching of 3-4 year olds. Of the 26, 5 served as teachers every day, 11 were assistants one day a week, and 10 were on site one day every other week. A questionnaire was completed by preservice teachers at the end of the semester to determine their perceptions of the experience. When the open-ended questions were coded, four categories emerged that depicted strengths of the program: viewing growth in early literacy development; authentic field experience; shared book experience; and use of literacy play centers. Results indicated that the amount of involvement on the part of the respondents influenced their attitudes concerning the value of literacy play centers in a preschool setting and in the overalll emergent literacy development of the children. Findings suggest that the least involved respondents may not have been able to see the overall development of these children due to their limited participation. (Contains six references.) (CR)

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University and Urban School District Collaboration: Preschoolers and Preservice Teachers Gain Literacy Skills

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Lynn Romeo
Susan A. Young
Monmouth University

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Background

It has become increasingly more apparent that university/ community school partnerships are a valuable model for promoting effective school improvement (Wangemann, Ingram, Cregg & Muse, 1989). In addition, these collaborative endeavors have provided assistance to diverse students from low-income families (Ascher, 1989). This model also enhances the preservice teachers' understanding of instructional methodology by allowing them an opportunity to practice what they have learned in the university classroom in a field placement (Darling, 1995).

Our collaboration began when a school superintendent in an urban area wanted to provide free preschool experience to three and four year old pupils. In the past, sixty percent of the incoming kindergartners in his school district had no preschool experiences. These students historically had very little prior exposure to print. A program was needed to provide enriching preschool activities without incurring additional financial stress to the urban community.

The university, as part of a community outreach effort, embraced the concept of a partnership. The collaboration provided the preschool with preservice teachers. In return, we were hopeful that the university students would gain invaluable experience working with the preschoolers and using techniques learned in their literacy courses.

We wanted the preschool youngsters to enjoy interacting with print in a relaxed atmosphere filled with caring university students. State of the art Literacy Play Centers were designed to allow preschoolers an opportunity to experiment with print on their own terms.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated whether a field placement in a preschool program enhanced preservice teachers' understanding of the emerging literacy process.

Methodology

This study was conducted in two preschool classrooms in an urban school district in central New Jersey. Twenty-six graduate and undergraduate preservice teachers participated in this university/community preschool partnership.

The preservice teachers were involved in teaching or assisting in the teaching of three and four year old children, three days a week during the Spring semester of 1996. In total, there were thirty-six two hour sessions. Five students served as the teachers throughout the semester. Eleven students were assistants one day per week and the remaining ten students were on site one day every other week.

A questionnaire was given to the preservice teachers at the end of the semester to determine their perceptions of the experience. Twenty-three items were rated on the following scale:

1 not at all
2 somewhat
3 pretty much
4 a lot
5 very much

The items assessed the participants' overall enjoyment in the project as well as specific aspects of this collaborative venture. Questions were posed about their participation in the shared book experience and the literacy play centers. Additional questions were designed to ascertain if the preservice teachers observed developing language patterns, motor skill acquisition and early attempts at reading and writing.

Two open-ended questions were also posed regarding the aspects of the project that were viewed as most advantageous for their professional growth as preservice teachers. Their perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of the preschool program were assessed as well as their comments regarding future program improvement.

The open-ended questions were coded categorically in search of patterns and emergent themes.

Results

A one-way analysis of variance was utilized to compare the responses to each item on the questionnaire between the three types of respondents (teacher, every week assistants and every other week assistants). Significant results were followed up with post hoc analyses using the Tukey HSD test.

Three interpretable clusters of results were revealed by the analyses. The first cluster of results involved questions that concerned the respondents' evaluation of the overall field experience. The three types of respondents significantly differed in their feelings on the school based project, $F(2,23) = 11.44$, $p < .001$. Every other week respondents enjoyed participating less than the every week ($p < .05$) and teacher ($p < .05$) respondents. The same finding held true when respondents were asked whether they felt participation gave them experience with shared book reading, $F(2, 23) = 6.82$, $p < .05$. Every other week respondents agreed with this statement less than the every week ($p < .05$) and teacher ($p < .05$) respondents. Differences in enjoyment of reading the children's literature, $F(2, 23) = 5.02$, $p < .02$, showed that the every other week enjoyed this reading less than the every week ($p < .05$) and teacher ($p < .05$) respondents. Finally, when asked if the respondent would recommend this project to other preservice teachers, there was a significant difference between the types of respondents, $F(2, 23) = 7.76$, $p < .004$. Again, every other week respondents were less likely to endorse recommending the project to others than every week respondents ($p < .05$) and teacher respondents ($p < .05$).

The second cluster of results involved questions concerning the respondent's experiences while participating in the Literacy Play Centers. Overall, there was a difference among the three groups concerning whether participation gave one practical experience, $F(2, 23) = 5.10$, $p < .02$. Post hoc analyses revealed that teachers felt participating gave them more practical experience than every other week respondents ($p < .05$). The three groups differed when asked whether participation gave one a first hand glimpse at early literacy development, $F(2, 23) = 4.66$ $p < .03$. Teachers agreed with this statement significantly more than every other week respondents. There was also differences in agreement between the three groups when asked about whether participation gave one exposure to developing language patterns ($F(2, 23) = 6.25$, $p < .01$) as well as exposure to early attempts at writing ($F(2, 23) = 3.64$, $p < .05$). In both cases, Tukey HSD tests revealed that teachers agreed with these statements significantly more than every other week respondents ($p < .05$). Respondents also differed in their perceptions of whether the children's pretend reading and writing increased during the semester, $F(2, 23) = 4.33$, $p < .03$. Again, post hoc analyses showed that teachers were more likely to feel that pretend reading and writing had increased as compared to the every other week respondents ($p < .05$). Finally, the three groups of respondents

differed in the level of enjoyment of being able to actively participate in the early literacy activities and strategies, $F(2,23) = 4.02$, $p < .04$. Teachers enjoyed this active participation significantly more than the every other week respondents ($p < .05$). Overall, this group of results suggests that being involved in the project as teachers may have allowed these respondents to gain a better overall picture of emergent literacy development. Every other week respondents who were the least involved in the project did not appear to gain this insight.

The third cluster of results involved feelings about the literacy play centers themselves. The respondents differed in their enjoyment of using Literacy Play Centers , $F(2, 23) = 9.65$, $p < .001$. Teacher respondents enjoyed the play centers significantly more than the every week respondents ($p < .05$), as well as the every other week respondents ($p < .05$). The three groups also differed when asked whether assisting in the completion of center activity sheets gave them additional insight about the children's emergent literacy development, $F (2, 23) = 6.79$, $p < .005$. Again, teachers felt this activity gave them significantly more insight as compared to the every week respondents ($p < .05$) as well as the every other week respondents ($p < .05$).

In conclusion, the pattern of the results suggest that the amount of involvement on the part of the respondents influenced their attitudes concerning the value of the literacy play centers in a preschool setting. Respondents who were more actively involved (i.e., in the role of the teacher) were more likely to see the value of the play centers in the overall emergent literacy development of the children. The least involved (i.e., the every other week respondents) may not have been able to see the overall development of these children as their participation in the project was limited. These results may have implications for how to increase the benefits of a preservice program that involves the use of Literacy Play Centers.

MEANS (and std. dev.) FOR THE 3 GROUPS OF RESPONDENTS

	TEACHERS	EVERY WEEK	EVERY OTHER WEEK
	N=5	N=11	N=10
CLUSTER #1			
Q1	5.00 (0.00)	4.40 (0.52)	3.12 (1.08)
Q9	4.80 (0.48)	4.60 (0.52)	3.45 (1.13)
Q21	4.80 (0.48)	4.60 (0.52)	3.63 (1.12)
Q23	5.00 (0.00)	4.60 (0.52)	3.64 (1.03)
CLUSTER #2			
Q2	4.80 (0.45)	4.30 (0.82)	3.36 (1.12)
Q3	5.00 (0.00)	4.30 (0.81)	3.64 (1.06)
Q4	5.00 (0.00)	4.20 (0.79)	3.36 (1.12)
Q6	5.00 (0.00)	4.40 (0.70)	3.82 (1.08)
Q14	4.60 (0.89)	3.50 (1.43)	2.64 (1.21)
Q16	4.80 (0.45)	4.00 (0.82)	3.55 (0.93)
Q17	4.80 (0.45)	3.40 (0.84)	3.64 (1.12)
CLUSTER #3			
Q11	5.00 (0.00)	3.50 (0.97)	3.00 (0.89)
Q15	4.80 (0.45)	2.70 (1.34)	3.27 (0.90)

When the open-ended questions were coded, four categories clearly emerged that depicted strengths of the program. The students were very positive about being able to view growth in early literacy development. They also enjoyed the opportunity of an authentic field experience that merged theory with practice. In addition, the participants gained knowledge regarding the Shared Book Experience and the use of Literacy Play Centers to enhance emerging literacy development in a preschool setting.

The following comments made by the respondents were representative of the four categories that emerged from the open ended-questions.

1. Viewing Growth in Early Literacy Development

"The most beneficial part of the preschool project was seeing the progress made by the children. It was an absolutely rewarding experience."

" Communicating and playing with the preschoolers every week and watching them change was very beneficial. There were some students who didn't speak at the beginning of the program who were transformed into outgoing children by the end of the project.

"I am happy to have had this valuable opportunity to be a small, but what I think to be an important part of these children's lives."

2. Authentic Field Experience

"The most beneficial part of the project was being able to see what we learned in class applied in a preschool environment."

"I really enjoyed being so involved in an actual classroom instead of just reading about it. I feel more prepared and confident now in becoming a teacher."

"This project was a valuable learning experience. I got to see everything that we talk about in class in a real classroom. It was a tremendous help when it came time to study because I had a visual image to guide me."

3. Shared Book Experience

"I enjoyed the Shared Book Experience because the children really enjoyed listening to the stories while following a line of print."

"I feel much more confident now executing a shared book lesson with young children. I truly believe that the more opportunities that you have to practice techniques and strategies, the more prepared you will be as a teacher."

4. Use of Literacy Play Centers

"I believe that the children's interactions with other children and the assistants in the play centers helped them to be emerged in literacy through their play. The children were actively writing menus, receipts, orders, checks, letters, etc. In addition, they were beginning to recognize the words and letters that were posted in each play center."

"I think that the most beneficial part was observing the children attempting to read and write in the Literacy Play Centers. Through watching some of the children engage in print, I was able to see the various levels of written language development. Today two children

actively engaged themselves in check writing in the bank. They wrote the amount, date, and who the check was for."

Overall, it appears that an authentic field placement certainly enhances the preservice teachers' knowledge about emerging literacy. In addition, the amount of on-site time, affected the value of the experience for the participants. The results of this study are being utilized for program improvement. The preschool, currently in its second year of operation, continues to meet the needs of both the urban preschoolers as well as the university students.

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